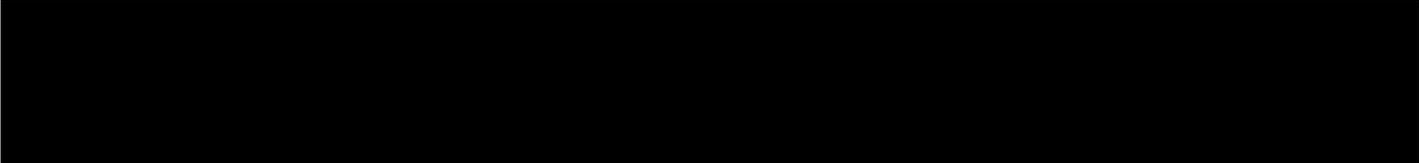


2014 IMPACT REPORT





July, 2015

On behalf of the Board of Directors of South Ottawa Community Legal Services, I am pleased to send you our community legal clinic's annual Impact Report. It offers a good snapshot of how our legal clinic makes a difference for the low-income residents of southern and eastern Ottawa.

It is always a challenge to measure "success" in community legal work. For example, the outcomes of our cases are an important factor in assessing our community impact, but case outcomes are only one piece of a bigger picture. Being accessible to offer legal advice to vulnerable clients, and helping people seek justice where there might be a limited chance of success, are also important factors.

In assessing our impact, we ask ourselves:

- Are we making good choices in the types of legal assistance we can offer?
- Are we making good decisions about the ways we seek justice for our clients?
- Are we addressing the legal issues of Ottawa's low-income and vulnerable people?

The answers to these questions help us decide how we should assist the communities we serve.

Our goal is to make an impact every day. We hope this report offers you a sense of our impact in 2014.



Agnes Davis
Chair, Board of Directors

South Ottawa Community Legal Services

Our community legal clinic works to bring justice to our community. We offer a range of legal services for low-income residents of southern and eastern Ottawa, including:

- Legal information and advice;
- Representation in court cases and tribunal hearings;
- Appropriate referrals to partner agencies;
- Presentations on legal issues;
- Working closely with community organizations; and
- “Law reform” actions aimed at improving the lives of the people we serve.

We focus our work on legal issues that people face in these areas:

- Rental housing for tenants;
- Immigration and refugee law;
- Ontario Disability Support Program benefits;
- Ontario Works benefits;
- Workplace Safety and Insurance benefits for injured workers;
- Employment Insurance benefits;
- Child Tax Benefits;
- Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Pension benefits.

We offer services in English and French; and we use interpreters for all other languages.

A Snapshot: Our Impact in 2014

- ✓ Helping low-income households obtain more than \$788,000 in disability benefits: \$452,000 in lump-sum, retroactive payments and a further \$336,000 annually by increased monthly benefits for their families’ basic needs;
- ✓ Reducing “overpayments” of basic needs government benefits;
- ✓ Resolving complex immigration and refugee legal issues to assist newcomers in securing their futures;
- ✓ Providing legal assistance to tenants at risk of eviction;
- ✓ Collaborating on community projects to improve Ottawa tenants’ rights;
- ✓ Conducting 17 public legal education sessions; and
- ✓ Assisting front-line community workers and hundreds of their clients through “Connecting Ottawa,” a project for improving access to legal services for people who have language and communication barriers.

Success on Disability Appeals

A high rate of success:

We help people appeal decisions denying disability benefits from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or the Canada Pension Plan (CPP). In 2014, we assisted 105 people in their ODSP appeals. 85 people had cases strong enough to proceed; and 75 of their cases (88%) were successful. Our clients won their cases either by a tribunal decision (in 71% of winning cases) or by settling their case with ODSP before the tribunal hearing (in 29% of winning cases). These figures do not include the 20 cases where our clients withdrew their cases during the appeal process.

Successful appeals mean community members receive additional benefits to live on:

Winning these disability appeals means our clients receive more money to live on than if they had to rely on Ontario Works (social assistance) benefits. In 2014, our clients' successful appeals meant they received increased benefits for their basic needs of over **\$28,000 per month (or \$336,000 annualized)**. They also received increased monthly benefits to cover rent and utilities.

On average, our clients received **\$373** more per month for food, clothing and other necessities for each of our clients' families.

Successful appeals mean community members receive money owing to them:

Due to the length of time that disability appeals take, a successful case means that our clients also receive retroactive disability benefits to which they are legally entitled. In 2014, our legal assistance resulted in low-income individuals and families receiving over **\$452,000** in retroactive "basic needs" benefits. The average payment was over **\$6,000** per household.

For disabled low-income families, this payment is often the only way to pay off debts, buy household items or to save for future expenses.



Who in Our Community Needs to Rely On The Ontario Disability Support Program?

Our clients come from every conceivable situation. Some have longstanding, deep roots in Canada. Others came to Canada more recently, hoping for a better life. Some people stopped working due to injury. Others struggled against the odds to keep working. Some clients spent many years raising their children and have little work experience outside their homes.

Our clients are sometimes young adults, or middle-aged, or (increasingly) people in their sixties. We see people of all ages and all backgrounds trying to deal with significant medical issues.

Some people have been trying to cope with mental health illnesses: depression or anxiety that can lock them in their homes. Others have painful physical conditions that have dragged on for years.

Many clients have multiple medical conditions and have become overwhelmed by their symptoms. Frequently, these problems cannot be seen on x-rays or medical tests, which is often why their applications for disability benefits were denied in the first place.

All of our clients have one thing in common: their medical problems have limited their ability to work, so they have ended up with very low incomes, and they now have to financially depend on government benefits programs. Few people expected to be faced with this difficult situation.



Resolving Social Benefits Overpayments

Our clients live far below any “poverty line.” Many clients rely on social benefits for their basic needs. However, the complexity of the rules governing these benefits frequently leads government officials to decide that people have been “overpaid.” Those decisions mean people have to repay money they have already spent on necessities.

In 2014, our work on overpayment appeals resulted in overturning government decisions totalling over **\$7,500**. That amount of reduced debt means that our clients had more money to afford monthly necessities for their families.

Why Is Legal Assistance in Income Support Program Cases Important For Our Community?

When people do not have secure incomes, the entire community is affected. If rent and utilities cannot be paid on time, landlords and public utilities risk losing money. If tenants miss rent payments, they risk eviction, involving an often stressful hearing of the publicly funded Landlord and Tenant Board. If eviction occurs, personal possessions - furniture, valued items, clothing - can be lost if storage is not available or if an emergency shelter becomes home.

If a person does not have the money to purchase basic necessities, the local economy shrinks. People might have to turn to food banks. Sometimes they can't afford medications. The overall effect leads to declining mental and physical health, straining our health care system.

However, when people have more secure incomes and social benefits, they can plan better and manage their financial responsibilities: rent and utilities can be paid, groceries and basic necessities purchased, debts reimbursed. Public transit becomes more accessible, permitting better participation in social activities, including volunteer work. The local economy grows and the community benefits.

Housing Law Assistance



- ✓ We provide regular telephone and in-person housing law advice. In 2014, over 600 people received housing-related advice from our legal staff.
- ✓ We take part in the Ottawa's Tenant Duty Counsel Program, where low-income tenants get immediate legal assistance at the Landlord and Tenant Board before their hearing takes place.
- ✓ In 2014, our community legal clinic's legal staff assisted more than 300 tenants at the Landlord and Tenant Board: resolving eviction cases, advising about maintenance issues, negotiating with landlords and frequently settling cases so that tenancies are continued.

Organizing Ottawa Tenants Conference

Our community legal clinic also assisted in organizing the 7th Annual Ottawa Tenants Conference.

Helping Newcomers to Canada Secure their Futures

- In 2014, we resolved complex immigration issues for clients from Burundi, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Somalia. The issues ranged from representing refugee claimants to stopping removals from Canada of extremely vulnerable clients.
- We helped 13 families obtain permanent residence in Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Most cases involved people who were already in Canada. Two cases involved family members abroad being able to join their families in Canada.
- We assisted a young woman whose difficult circumstances had led to her living on the street as a teenager. Getting permanent resident status in Canada gave her the stability to get her life back on track.
- We represented a family with serious medical and financial challenges. One parent had suffered torture in their country of origin. Resolving their immigration status has assisted the family on the road to supporting themselves and contributing to their community.
- In 2014, we received government immigration-related decisions with errors that could only be overturned by the Federal Court. We were able to settle several cases in our clients' favour without the significant time and expense of a court hearing.



Connecting
Ottawa

Effective communication
Accessible justice

Connexion
Ottawa

Une communication efficace
Une justice accessible

South Ottawa Community Legal Services has continued to be a lead agency in the Connecting Ottawa network. With generous funding from The Law Foundation of Ontario, Connecting Ottawa brings together more than 45 partner agencies. Connecting Ottawa's goal is to make better links to legal information, legal services and to Ottawa's community health and social services, for people who don't speak English or French or who have communication-related disabilities.

- ✓ A lawyer and a social worker provide direct consultations with front-line workers in our network of partner agencies. In 2014, these consultations assisted over 270 people and their families.
- ✓ For many people who seek professional advice and assistance, there is a gap between the referral to the agency that can provide services and the actual connection to that agency. Due to communication barriers, some clients never connect with the services they need.

Connecting Ottawa tries to bridge this gap with volunteer facilitators who are trained and supported to systematically overcome the barriers to making this connection. Connecting Ottawa rejuvenated this facilitator service in the second half of 2014: our facilitators assisted 9 clients with the follow-ups they needed.

- ✓ Connecting Ottawa's bilingual website makes the link between the Community Information Center of Ottawa's resources and the *Your Legal Rights* website that Community Legal Education Ontario produces. Making these linkages provides quick access to justice resources for Ottawa-based front-line workers.
- ✓ Connecting Ottawa also offers public legal education workshops, presentations to front-line workers and other learning opportunities.

Our Clients' Comments

“The clinic is very good at helping people who need legal services but no means of financial support.”

“I have a trusting relationship with my lawyer and have received valuable guidance all the way.”

“The clinic was accessible and welcoming.”

« Sincèrement, votre service est réellement excellent. »